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Cataracts

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Cataracts

Acknowledgements

2014 Echo Fiction Prize Winner

CATARACTS
{Winner of the 2014 Echo Fiction Prize}
Nick Holt

Today is the day I push the machines into the sea. So many obscure pipes and gears sticking out this way and that. And to think that I thought them beautiful; they are not beautiful. They only function to make “me” into “them.” See, one day as I tinkered, as I planned and schematized how to fit the creator of the universe into a box, I noticed a black bump on a knuckle of my writing hand. I tinkered onward, but an hour later, the bump was no bump, but a little steel gear where my knuckle might have been. With each flex of the hand, a spout of steam hissed from a small exhaust. I tinkered onward, but, the next day, each knuckle had been replaced. And the day after that, my fingers were shiny, metal coils of the sort one might find on a Swiss Army knife. And the day after that, my arms--car exhaust pipes, my legs-- long copper rods conjoined with large wrenches at the knee, my mouth--sputtering oil instead of saliva, my torso-- a generator displaying a sinusoidal energy graph in lieu of heartbeats. My eyes alone remained to watch it happen.

My hearing I lost gradually. First, there was a slight hum, in the quiet of my bedroom, barely there. But I couldn't make out the melody my radio had played moments before. The next day a friend visited, and I only understood certain of his words. I begged him whether he heard it; he laughed. I taught arithmetic at a school near my home. I could not hear my students' questions for the roar of gears grinding, pistons firing, and sockets wrenching.

But I couldn't stop. I could not stop tinkering any more than a society could stop progressing, or a small boy could stop asking questions, or an ant eater could stop eating ants. Twenty-three years and no returns. Can you imagine? Coming up empty? That early in life? Where does one go? What does one do? I had to find the bottom of it all. At least I had to know that there was a bottom. I tinkered onward; the machines multiplied.

There is a sorry exchange that occurs when one learns something new. I wish that my teachers had explained it to me. I wish that their teachers had explained to them the transaction that often takes place: something real is lost to the measuring sticks of academia. I taught a student that Mt. Everest is 8,848 meters above sea level. I never taught him that a meter is just an ar-

bitrary measurement decided upon by a bunch of rowdy French politicians in the late 16th century. I never taught him that the best description of the mountain could be just "Everest."

But I did not tinker with reality. I tinkered with my life. A student who makes meters of a mountain's majesty has little to lose except perhaps his imagination. But I turned the process round-- I made meters of myself. And the machines multiplied.

I spent my nights slaving beneath them. Thinking and thinking and thinking. Pacing and pacing and pacing. I parsed my existence for any sign of a point. But each epiphany brought new mechanisms and new frameworks to follow. I hesitated once when the whirring of the motors seemed to envelope my mind. I lay unconscious on my floor for hours. But there had to be something. No one wants to be damned, but no one wants to be meaningless.

The day after I fainted I drove to my doctor's office. He was always a nice man. He made jokes, he asked questions, he showed concern without scolding me. He reminded me of my grandfather.

"I'm broken," I told him as he helped me into his office. "You're a down-right mess is what you are, John!" he barked back, beaming. I sat on the examination bed. "No need to worry, we'll get you fixed up! Happens to all of us!" The room was entirely white, tile to ceiling. Labeled drawers lined an entire wall. It was a large office. "You can see what's happened to me?" I sputtered, as he laid my head back. "Of course I can. I name everyone's maladies, and I name the cures, John. I am a doctor after all." He smiled patiently. His white teeth gleamed under the fluorescent lights that lit the room.

"What's wrong with me?" I asked him. "John, it's nothing much to worry over. It happens to all of us at a certain age. Be glad you're getting it over with! Just think of it as the final step into manhood. There is an operation. I promise you will be well after the surgery. But I must act quickly." He rifled through a box of medical instruments in the corner of the room. I rolled over to see the white wall of drawers.

* * *

At first, I was blinded by the reflected light. Then the drawers came into focus. One label read *Charlotte Mckenzie, Psychologist*. Another read: *James Pickett, Mathematician*. Another drawer was slightly open: *Mark Harris, Actor*. I could see several metal shafts and a wrench. Then, another read: *Allen Fentress, Lawyer*. Another: *Eliza Robinson, Physicist*. There were many more, each marked in the same fashion, each with name and occupation, each a 1' x 5" rectangle, each perfectly sterile. But my eyes settled on one:

{ *John Fernsby, Philosopher* }

He had already unscrewed my left shin. He opened my drawer and threw in the wrench, before returning to my thigh. "Doctor!" I shouted, "Doctor!" He said nothing; he only worked. My left thigh was in the drawer. My left arm was in the drawer. I threw myself onto him and with a metallic clang my right shoulder slammed into his skull. I dragged myself across the floor, out the door, and down the hall. My frame screeched against the pavement outside. I drove home.

It was almost silent in my room. I sobbed. Doctrines burn as quickly as paper. I lit a match and burned them, every one. Every treatise, every truth, every lack thereof, and every diagram. The machine parts were strewn everywhere. A man on the radio sang a melody.